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"My Own Chinese Romance"

THE self-told story of an American girl's marriage to the son of a Chinese Mandarin. A story which proves again that truth is stranger, often more thrilling and dramatic in its climaxes, than the veriest fiction. It is a story simply told—without adornment or recourse to the usual tricks of the biographer. Somewhere it teaches a lesson, and points a moral. As to what this lesson is or what the moral—readers will disagree. Some will say it is a sign of danger, a prophecy of absorption. Others will say it is the revelation of a condition few, who know only the West, suspected. But all critics will agree that it is an amazing narrative of a remarkable experiment, doubly absorbing because it is true.

I SAW Chan-King Liang for the first time on a certain Monday morning in October. It was the opening day of college, and the preceding week had been filled with the excitement incidental to the arrival of many students in a small town given over to family life. Every household possessed of a spare room was impressed with the fact that good citizenship demanded that it harbor a student. Therefore, when I saw trunks and boxes and bags being tumbled upon the front porch of our next door neighbor, I said to mother, "Mrs. James has succumbed!" and set out for my first class with Celia, an old friend.

As we crossed the campus we noticed a group of boys, gathered on the steps of College Hall and talking among themselves. Celia turned to me. "Do you see the one with very black hair, his face turned away a little—the one in the gray suit, Margaret?—Well, that is the new Chinese student, and the boys all say he is a wonder. My cousin knew him last year in Chicago, where he was a freshman. Going in for international law and political science—imagine!"

I turned and glanced with a faint interest at the foreign student, on whose black hair the sun was shining. My first impression was of a very young, smiling lad. "Looks well enough," I said, rather ungraciously, and we passed on.

I was a busy student, eagerly beginning my freshman year's work, and I thought no more of the young Chinese. But a day or so later I discovered him to be the owner of those trunks and bags I had seen assembled on Mrs. James's porch. Chan-King was my next door neighbor.

We were never introduced to each other, as it happened, and, though we shared studies in German and French, we did not exchange a word for some time. Later I found myself admiring his feat of learning two foreign languages through the medium of English, a third, and doing it so very well. At the same time, though I was not then aware of the fact, he was also admiring me for proficiency in these subjects, in which I was working hard, because I intended to teach languages.

The progress of my interest in him was gradual and founded on a sense of his complete remoteness, an utter failure to regard him as a human being like the rest of us. He was the first of his race I had ever seen. But finally we spoke to one another by some chance, and, after that, it seemed unnecessary to refuse to walk to class with him on a certain morning when we came out of our houses at the same moment.

We parted at College Hall door with an exchange of informal little nods. I was happily impressed, but my impulse to friendship suffered a quick reaction from all that Chan-King was when viewed against the background of his race as I saw it. I had no intention whatever of continuing our association.

Naturally, Chan-King knew nothing of this. I think I was probably a trifle more courteous to him than was necessary. I remember being uneasy for fear of wounding him by some thoughtless remark that would reveal my true state of mind about China. I lost sight of the race in the individual. I even pretended not to notice that he was waiting for me morning after morning when I emerged, always a trifle late, hurrying to classes. By the close of the first semester we were making the trip together almost daily as a matter of course.

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He was gay and friendly, with a sort of frank joyousness that was his own special endowment for living. I enjoyed his companionship, his talk, his splendid spirit. His cheerfulness was a continual stimulant to my moody, introspective, static temperament. I used to study his face, which in repose had the true Oriental impassivity—a stillness that suggested an inner silence or brooding. But this mood was rare in those days, and I remember best his laughter, his shining eyes that never missed the merriment to be had from the day's routine events.

For a while we were merely two very conventional young students walking sedately together, talking with eagerness on what now seem amusingly sober and carefully chosen subjects. We were both determined to be dignified and impersonal. I was nineteen, and Chan-King was two years older.

Finally, Chan-King asked to call and he appeared at the door that evening laden with an enormous, irregular package, a collection of treasures that he thought might interest us. We all gathered about the library table, where he spread a flaming array of embroidered silks, carved ivory and sandalwood and curious little images in bronze and blackwood. They gave out a delicious fragrance, spicy and warm and sweet, with a bitter tang to it, a mingling of oils and lacquers and dust of incense.

He was very proud of half a dozen neckties his mother had made him, patterned carefully after the American one he had sent her as a souvenir. "She sews a great deal, and everything she does is beautiful," he said, stroking one of the ties, fashioned of wine colored silk and embroidered in a thin gold thread.

The simple words, the tangle of the exotic things lying on the table, in that moment set the whole world between us. I saw him as alien, far removed and unknowable; I realized how utterly transplanted he must be, moving as he did in a country whose ideals, manners and customs must appear, at times, grotesquely fantastic to him. "How queer we must seem to you!" I exclaimed, impulsively, lifting a solid, fat little idol in my hand.

"Queer? Not at all—but wonderfully interesting in everything. You see, to me it is all one world!" Our eyes met for a second. Then he offered me a small embroidered Chinese flag. I hesitated, looking at the writhing, fire breathing dragon done in many colored silks. Again the old prejudice swept over me. I was about to refuse. But I saw in his eyes an expression of hesitating, half anxious pleading, which touched me. I took the flag, puzzled a trifle over that look I had surprised.

Chan-King became a frequent visitor at our home in the evenings, making friends with my father and mother, with true Chinese deference. I like to remember those times, with all of us sitting around the big table, the shaded lamp casting a clear circle of light on the books and papers, the rest of the room in pleasant dimness. It was during these evenings that Chan-King told us about his father, typical Chinese product of his clan and time, who had early perceived the limitations of a too nationalistic point of view and had planned western education for his sons, of whom Chan-King was the eldest. From his talk I reconstructed a half picture of his home in southern China. It was a large household of brothers and relatives and servants ruled over by his mother during the prolonged absences of his father, whose business interests lay in a far away island port.

Once he brought a faded photograph of a small boy formally arrayed in the Chinese velvets and satins of an earlier period. "Myself at the age of six," he explained.

I examined the picture closely. "Why Mr. Liang," I said, in wonder, "you are wearing a—wearing a—queue!"

He smiled, delighted at my confusion. "Yes, a very nice queue it was," he declared, "bound with a scarlet silk cord. I remember how it waved in the wind when I flew my kite on the hills!"

"You wore a black queue yourself, Margaret," interposed my mother, her eyes twinkling, "shorter than this, but often tied with a red silk ribbon."

"You see, we had that in common, at least," said Chan-King. And he flashed a grateful smile at mother. There was a well established friendship between my kindly, understanding mother and Chan-King, while my feeling for him was still uncertain.

Yet in spite of all these reasons for close sympathy with Chan-King I felt toward him at times something amounting almost to dislike. Against such states of mind my sense of personal justice, a trait I had directly from my Scotch inheritance, instantly rebelled. I was careful in no way to reveal my feelings, though I probably should have done so had I even remotely realized that friendship was verging upon love. As it was, I had an ideal of genuine comradeship, of a pleasant interlude destined to end with our college days.

Toward the end of the winter as our acquaintance advanced there came to me a series of those revulsions. I assured myself that so ephemeral a relation as ours must be was hardly worth the time I was giving to it. I remembered that, fine as Chan King was, he belonged to the Chinese race. I decided to put an end to the entire episode at once. The way in which I carried out this plan was unnecessarily abrupt. I avoided him, unmistakably, going to class and returning home by a roundabout way, and refusing to see him either in class or on the campus.

Then, one afternoon at the end of two weeks, he was waiting for me before the main door of College Hall. I did not speak. He joined me without a word and walked in silence to the campus edge. I turned suddenly toward a side street. "Go that way if you like," I said, rudely. "I have an errand this way."

He came with me. "I wish to talk with you," he said, with an oddly restrained, patient tone of weariness. Our eyes met, and I saw in his a gentle and touching determination to understand and be understood, which would have been more significant to me if I had been less engrossed in my own emotions.

"Why do you wish to end our friendship?" he asked, quietly, with his characteristic frankness.

"I—because I thought it was best," I stammered, completely disarmed.

"It is never best to give up a friendship," he said. "But it happens that our friendship may end soon after all. It is possible I shall return to China. To-day I received a cablegram from my father, saying my mother is dangerously ill. I shall know within a day or so whether I am to go or to stay."

Human sympathy triumphed over race prejudice. "Come home with me," I said, "and let mother talk to you. She always knows what to say."

Another cablegram two days later brought the good news of his mother's improvement. Chan-King's anxiety during those two days wrung me. He said nothing, but his face was strained and lined. He walked and we talked a good deal of other things, and he gave me definite outlines of his "life plan," as he called it. He regarded the diplomatic service of his country as his final goal, but on the way to it he wished to take part in constructive teaching and sociological work in China. He was keenly enthusiastic about the ancient arts and natural beauties of China and venerated many of her old customs. "I hope introducing modern education will not destroy the beauty of the East," he told me, but he was solidly convinced of the need for new ideas in all the Orient. I began to see his country through new eyes.

"The background of his race," the great, mysterious China whence he came and which I knew was watching him silently, but none the less intently.

We were soon going about together a great deal. I remember many happy parties on the lantern lighted campus, many field days and tennis matches, all the innocent freedom of college life that we enjoyed together. I was rather remote in my personal friendships, and very little was said to me regarding my association with the Chinese student. But now I began to hear small murmurs, a vague hum of discussion, and to observe an interested watching of us by the students and townspeople. I could not help seeing that curious glances followed us when we entered a tea room or concert hall together.

Several friends of my mother's spoke disapprovingly to her of the matter. "What if they should fall in love—marry?" asked one conventional minded old lady. But my mother was born without prejudices and never sees boundary lines or nationalities. She was infinitely tactful and kind. I know now that she was rather uneasy, for she felt that marriage is a difficult enough relation when each person knows

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